```
VZCZCXRO5673
PP RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHDBU RUEHLH RUEHNEH RUEHPW
DE RUEHKA #0897 2580855
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 150855Z SEP 09
FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9451
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RHHMUNS/COMSOCPAC HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHMCSUU/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
```

C O N F I D E N T I A L DHAKA 000897

SIPDIS

DEPT. FOR SCA/INSB

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/14/2019
TAGS: PINS PGOV ENRG EPET EINV BG
SUBJECT: WORK STOPPAGE AGAINST FOREIGN ENERGY COMPANIES
FIZZLES

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1.   (C) A fringe group opposing the development of
Bangladesh's natural resources failed to garner widespread
support for its September 14 work stoppage, or hartal. The
National Committee to Protect Oil, Mineral Resources, Power
and Ports called the hartal to protest a Government of
Bangladesh (GOB) decision to sign offshore oil exploration
agreements with international oil companies, including U.S.
firm ConocoPhillips. None of Bangladesh's main political
parties took to the streets, which meant the hartal was
nothing more than a low-key protest. Though this hartal, the
first in nearly three years in Bangladesh, fizzled, stronger
opposition groups may once again in the future choose to use
hartals, a traditional and sometimes violent tool, against
the GOB.

Hartal Fizzles; Slight Property Damage

¶2.   (U) The National Committee to Protect Oil, Mineral
Resources, Power and Ports (the Committee) is a minor, but
vocal, opponent of the development of Bangladesh's natural
resources, particularly investment in the energy sector by
foreign companies. The Committee has focused its ire on the
GOB's decision to grant oil and gas exploration rights in the
Bay of Bengal to two international companies, U.S. firm
ConocoPhillips and Ireland's Tullow. Following a recent
small protest that gained headlines because police were
heavy-handed in blocking demonstrators, the group called for
a half-day work stoppage, or hartal, on September 14.

¶3.   (SBU) Activists from inconsequential leftist parties and
some Dhaka University students made up most of the small
crowd of pickets during the hartal. The pickets attempted to
close two areas of downtown Dhaka, close to the Ministry of
Foreign Affairs (MFA). (Note: During a phone call with
Poloff on a separate issue, MFA officials seemed more
concerned about the imminent departure of the Foreign
Minister to Washington than about what was happening nearby.
End Note.) The small group chanted slogans supporting the
hartal. The pickets successfully stopped traffic in their
immediate vicinity, but traffic elsewhere in Dhaka remained
normal. Shops opened as usual, and business was not affected
by the hartal, a marked difference from past hartals. Some
activists also burned copies of a local newspaper, Prothom
Alo, which had criticized the call for a hartal. An observer
also noted that activists broke windows in four to five
vehicles. The hartal ended without major incidents at noon.
The Committee issued an ultimatum giving the GOB 30 days to
scrap the exploration agreements by October 15 or the

Committee would act on October 16.

BNP Support for Hartal

¶4. (C) Begum Zia's deputy, BNP Secretary General Khandaker
Delwar Hossain, expressed "moral support" for the protestors,
though BNP activists did not participate in the hartal.
Delwar Hossain said his party would resist the government's
"conspiracy of protecting foreigners' interest." The Embassy
registered with BNP contacts its strong disapproval of
Hossain's statements. We stressed that it did not make sense
for the BNP to support a hartal against developing the energy
and power resources Bangladesh desperately needs with the
help of international oil companies, including U.S. firms.
We also deplored the BNP's support for the return to hartals,
which historically have been violent and counter-productive,
over constructive dialogue.

MORIARTY